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ABSTRACT

The Accelerated Schools Project (ASP) in Texas attempts to improve schooling for students in at-risk situations. Rather than lowering expectations for these learners, the ASP attempts to accelerate progress by maximizing their talent development. The accelerated schools movement in Texas spread rapidly, but few actual data have been collected about the application of accelerated schools concepts or the impact of accelerated schools. The Texas State Education Agency provided researchers with a list of 219 people and schools associated with the accelerated schools concept. Twenty-one percent of the 219 participants replied to a questionnaire developed for this survey. The accelerated schools movement appears to have had its greatest acceptance in elementary schools, and within those schools, minorities accounted for over 70 percent of the school population meeting the criteria for ASP at-risk students. Many schools identified themselves as accelerated if they have incorporated such techniques as assessing student learning styles, cooperative learning, use of educational technology, and hands-on manipulatives. Other schools characterize themselves more generally, but some appeared to reflect a deeper understanding of the accelerated model related to decision making and accelerated curricula. Schools identifying themselves as accelerated reported successful outcomes of a wide variety. Respondents also reflected a wide variety of training in the accelerated schools model. Overall, it appears that the language of accelerated schools is frequently used, but an understanding of the accelerated schools concept is less readily apparent. Much training did not appear to follow ASP guidelines. This study is limited by the low rate of questionnaire return, but gives some ideas about the implementation of accelerated schools in Texas. The questionnaire is attached. (Contains seven references.) (SLD)

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A Descriptive Assessment of Accelerated Schools Instruction in the State of Texas

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A paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago

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A Descriptive Assessment of Accelerated Schools Instruction

in the State of Texas

Introduction

Many students in schools are labeled as "at-risk" because of alleged learning gaps in key areas deemed important by society. Such students often begin their school careers without salient learning skills required for success. Providing remediation or compensatory educational services represents the most frequent way schools address this ever-increasing problem. The strategy often results in pulling students out of their regular classrooms or adapting regular classroom instruction to meet their "needs" (Hopfenberg, Levin, Meister, and Rogers, 1990). Rather than "catching up," students actually fall further behind their peers. Compensatory programs typically demand less of students and often result in reduced learning expectations through a process that stigmatizes them with a label of inferiority.

The Accelerated Schools Project (ASP) attempts to improve schooling for students in at-risk situations and represents an alternative to remediation. Rather than lowering expectations for these learners, the ASP attempts to accelerate progress by maximizing their talent development (Feldhusen, 1992; Renzulli, 1994). The program's goal is to have all students operating at grade level by the time they complete elementary school, thereby allowing enhanced opportunities for success in middle and secondary schools.

Beginning in 1986 with two elementary schools, the ASP had grown to over 700 elementary and middle schools in 37 states by 1994 (Levin, 1994). Schools have literally been transformed into models of efficiency and learning through adoption of three key

principles: unity of purpose, empowerment coupled with responsibility, and building on strengths (See Hopfenberg, Levin, & Associates, 1993 for an indepth discussion). Although different training models were used to facilitate the transformation to an accelerated school, the "Training for Expansion of Accelerated Schools Model" (1994) is the most effective.

In this model, the entire school population (faculty, parent and student representatives, support staff, etc.) participate in the training. The training employs a constructivist approach to learning; that is, people learn most effectively when they actively construct their own understanding of phenomena rather than being passive receivers of information. Training can be accomplished in four steps and takes about three weeks (Hopfenberg, et al., 1990). It is built around a range of interactive endeavors in which participants reflect on a variety of issues and become active participants in a number of carefully designed activities. Coaches assigned to the schools provide the training and follow-up support and guidance through questioning rather than providing answers and/or directives (Levin, 1994). Through this process, participants acquire expertise on and about the process of acceleration so that they will be able to infuse this knowledge into the operation of their own school.

While the "seeds" of acceleration were sown in a careful and systematic manner in such states as California, Louisiana, Colorado, and Massachusetts, Texas emerged as a notable exception. The interest in acceleration captured the attention of the Texas Education Agency and public schools alike, creating great demand for and information about the process. Acceleration in Texas was likened to a "prairie grassfire" that spread rapidly across the state. Meeting the demands for training and overcoming logistical barriers associated with travel and dissemination in a large state continues to challenge those associated with accelerated schools. Trainers often have not been able to adhere to the

indepth and long-term commitment required by the project.

To date, no follow-up study about the impact of the Accelerated Schools movement on schools exists in the state of Texas. Similarly, little is known about the usage, degree of adoption, or level of understanding constituents possess regarding their exposure to the model. The purpose of this study, then, was to assess the impact the Accelerated Schools movement has had in the state of Texas. Are there key characteristics constituents use when identifying their schools or methods of instruction as "accelerated?" Is it possible to generate a profile of acceleration that highlights the kinds of training experiences, successful outcomes and challenges encountered by a population of Texas educators identified as members of the accelerated community? These were key questions we attempted to address.

Method

Sample

A list generated by the Texas Education Agency provided the investigators with 219 names of individuals and schools associated with the Accelerated Schools concept. At the time of the listings (12-9-93) all had adopted some aspect of the Accelerated Schools Model and applied it to their schools.

Instrumentation

The investigators designed a questionnaire to ascertain both the level of usage and the effects of the Accelerated Schools movement in those schools identified through the Texas Education Agency. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: demographics and information pertaining to the Accelerated Schools movement (see Apprendix I). An outside measurement consultant familiar with the Accelerated Schools movement reviewed the questionnaire and supported the items as appropriate to the instrument's purpose.

Procedure

Two hundred and nineteen participants were identified from a list of schools identified through the Texas Education Agency as employing the Accelerated Schools concept in their instruction. The questionnaire, accompanied by a cover letter that introduced and explained the purpose of the study, was sent to contact persons at those schools identified as using the Accelerated Schools concept. For convenience, a self-addressed return envelope was included and participants assured that noone but the principal investigators would have access to the information; respondents were offered a copy of the results if interested. After a four-week period, a second round of mail-outs was sent. In an attempt to maximize returns, telephone calls to solicit responses were also made. Data were summarized and content analysis (Patton, 1980) used to identify trends and characteristics recorded by the respondents to the open-ended questions.

Results and Discussion

Twenty-one percent (21%) of the questionnaires were returned. Although limitations of this study are addressed later, the results and discussion are based solely on the summarization and content analysis of the data received to date. The data are presented in keeping with the format of the questionnaire.

Demographics

School population: School population in elementary schools ranged from 240 to 1025; middle/junior high school population ranged from 882 to 1056; senior high school population was 1768.

Other demographic data are summarized below:

Ethnicity:	White	28%
	African-American	16%
	Hispanic	54%
	Other	02%
Grade levels:	Elementary	94%
	Middle/Junior High	04%
	Senior High	02%

Based on the demographic data received, it appears that the Accelerated Movement in Texas has had its greatest acceptance in elementary schools (94%). Within the schools, minorities account for over 70% of the school population meeting the criteria of the Accelerated Schools Project for at-risk students. These are frequently schools whose scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) fall below the norm, particularly as they relate to minority students, and in which traditional approaches have not met with success.

Accelerated Schools Information

Question 1. Is your school accelerated: Of those who responded to this question, 60% consider their schools as accelerated and 90% consider their schools as using accelerated instruction.

Question 2. If so, define acceleration: Only two schools provided any kind of theoretical framework (a systematic model that has a philosophy of unity of purpose, building on strengths, and empowerment/accountability and whose faculty has been trained

in the accelerated schools model). Most schools defined acceleration from some practical aspect of acceleration (using cadres, hands-on learning, all students can learn, site-based governance, ensure students working at grade level).

Question 3. Characteristics of school: In listing characteristics that distinguish their schools as accelerated, most schools responded only with elements of what would be considered an accelerated school: use of manipulatives, cooperative learning, and peer mentoring; staff is child-oriented; student body heterogeneously grouped into homerooms; parental involvement in decision-making. A few schools appeared to have a fuller understanding: use of inquiry process to work through school-wide concerns; builds on strengths of staff, students, community, parents and empowers these individuals and holds them accountable for the results while focused on its mission by continually having a unity of purpose.

Question 4. Faculty training: All of the respondents except one stated that at least some faculty members received training in the accelerated schools process.

Question 5. Training by whom: The respondents were almost evenly divided in terms of the training done by outside consultants and by school personnel. Training dates ranged from 1991 to 1997, with the length of training from as little as one to two hours to ongoing training for two years.

Question 6. Follow-up training: Almost 80% of the respondents indicated that there was follow-up training after the intial training period.

Question 7. Follow-up training by whom/frequencyy: Respondents were again almost evenly divided in terms of the follow-up training conducted by outside consultants or school personnel; frequency of the follow-up training ranged from once to ongoing.

Question 8. Successfull outcomes: Numerous successful outcomes from the accelerated schools concept were reported, including specific outcomes such as enhanced

security, improved TAAS scores, using writing portfolios, lower failure rate for at-risk students to general process outcomes such as philosophical attitudes changed toward curriculum, assessing programs yearly, changing the frame of reference to plan vertically, strong overall awareness of what is happening on campus, taking stock continually, and successful cadre implementation with concrete results.

Question 9, Challenges encountered: Many of the challenges encountered in using the accelerated school concept had commonalities among the schools: helping the staff understand that the Accelerated Schools concept is process oriented; the difficulty of meeting the needs of the low functioning child while trying to prepare them for TAAS; keeping faculty trained; getting and keeping buy-in and high participation; lack of time; and keeping the language in use.

Question 10, Comments: Comments from the respondents were varied. Many were positive, such as ownership breeds success; more ideas and options available from bottom-up planning and evaluation; and it has held profound promise for facilitating meaningful change in what was once a rigid, lock-step environment. Other comments, however, suggested continuing challenges to the movement: it does not provide the strong curricular focus that many schools need; schools get so many programs going that they lose focus; training was good but it takes more than a team to make it happen; and some teachers are skeptical and do not want to drop parts of their curriculum or make changes. Four of the respondents indicated their schools were not participating in accelerated schools instruction.

Discussion

Little is known about the usage, degree of adoption, or level of understanding in schools regarding their exposure to the Accelerated Schools model in the state of Texas. This investigation, therefore, was designed as a follow-up study about the impact of the

Accelerated Schools movement on Texas schools. Key questions posed in this study were designed to ascertain key characteristics constituents use when identifying their schools or methods of instruction as "accelerated" and to generate a profile of acceleration that highlights the kinds of experiences, successful outcomes and challenges encountered by a population of Texas educators identified as members of the accelerated community.

Key characterisitics

It appears that many schools identify themselves as using accelerated instruction if they have incorporated such techniques as assessing student learning styles, cooperative learning, technology, and hands-on manipulatives; other schools use more general terminology in identifying the characteristics of their school such as "happy students, happy parents, happy teachers" or "all our students are smart and can learn." A few schools were more specific regarding their characteristics and appeared to reflect a deeper understanding of the accelerated model, such as "teams of personnel investigate/research questions/concerns/report findings to the school as a whole where decisions are made" and "all students are participating in an enriched curriculum."

Profile of Acceleration

Those schools which identify themselves as accelerated or using accelerated instruction report successful outcomes from such participation including lower failure rate for at-risk students, lower drop-out rate, attitude changes toward curriculum, decisions for new programs are researched, decisions based on what is best for students, teacher empowerment., unity of purpose by all staff, and more pupil-centered activities. Within these schools, challenges that frequently appeared were teacher buy-in, time for personnel

to develop needs and to plan, and turnover of teachers and administrators and/or not all staff receiving training. The profile of acceleration generated in this study reflected a wide variety of the kinds of accelerated schools training experienced and in the successful outcomes from accelerated schools implementation, with more commonality in the challenges encountered.

Training

Respondents reflected a wide variety of training in the Accelerated Schools model. It appears that at least some faculty members received training; however, that training was on a continuum of one day to six days. In addition, it appears that in some instances training was given to a team within a school rather than to the full faculty. Training to a team might account for almost half of the respondents indicating that training was done by school personnel. Most respondents indicated that follow-up training did take place. Again, however, this training varied from one time to yearly follow-up training. School personnel conducted follow-up training in approximately half of the schools responding.

Conclusions and Limitations

The "language" of the Accelerated Schools movement consistently appeared in responses to the questionnaire and those who wrote the responses apparently have a vocabulary that has developed from the movement. An understanding of the concepts which that language represents, however, seemed less clear through the responses. It appears most evident that much of the training did not follow the Accelerated Schools Project guidelines, including requiring a strong commitment to the philosophy and process of the model by the school community and the district office before training is given, having the training conducted by coaches from outside the school, and providing a

systematic process for follow-up (Levin, 1994). Without such a model, the result is likely to be that reflected by one respondent who indicated the school was given two days of training with no follow-up, resulting in the comment,"I believe the concept would be great for our school but nothing ever came of the training." The training model developed by the National Center for Accelerated Schools is clearly needed if schools in Texas are truly to participate in the Accelerated Schools movement. The formation of the Texas Center for Accelerated Schools appears to be a first step in that direction.

Some limitations were encountered in this study. The investigators had difficulty in obtaining an up-to-date list of schools using accelerated instruction; neither the recently established Texas Center for Accelerated Schools nor the National Center for Accelerated Schools have such lists. It was necessary, therefore, to use a 1993 list identified through the Texas Education Agency as schools employing the accelerated concept.

Yet another limitation to this study was the low return rate of questionnaires. Approximately 21% of the questionnaires were returned. After two rounds of mail-outs, follow-up telephone calls to solicit responses were made. A sample of these calls suggests that the low return may have been due to several factors: change of school personnel from the person in charge of accelerated instruction to changes in principals and other key administrators; schools no longer part of the Accelerated Schools movement; schools who have changed in structure or function and no longer exist as placed on the TEA list of schools using accelerated instruction. Because of the low rate of returns, we make no attempts at generalizability beyond the immediate data. Further attempts to increase the number of returns will be made, however, to allow the investigators a more complete assessment of accelerated schools instruction in the state of Texas and to move beyond these preliminary findings.

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Appendix I

Accelerated Schools Questionnaire

Accelerated Schools Questionnaire

Demographics

A. School population: _____

B. Student ethnicity (Per Cent):

White _____
African-American _____
Hispanic _____
Other _____

C. School grade levels _____

Questionnaire

1. Is your school considered to be either:

   a) An accelerated school? Yes_____ No_____

   b) A school using accelerated instruction? Yes_____ No_____

2. If yes, define acceleration as used in your school:

3. If yes, list the characteristics that distinguish your school as defined in question #2:

4. Have faculty members received any training in the accelerated (schools) process?

   Yes_____ No_____

5. If yes, by whom: a) Outside consultant _____ b) School personnel_____

   c) Other _____ (Please describe) _____

   When:_____

   Length of training:_____

6. Was there any follow-up after the initial training period?
   Yes_____ No_____

7. If yes, by whom: a) Outside consultant_____ b) School Personnel_____

   c) Other_____ (Please describe)_____

   Frequency:_____

8. List the successful outcomes resulting from the accelerated (schools) concept:

9. List the challenges encountered using the accelerated (schools) concept:

10. List any comments regarding your experiences with the accelerated (schools) concept:

Would you like a summary of the results?

Yes_____ No_____